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AUTHOR Willard, William
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ABSTRACT

Although Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, a Yankton Sioux Indian from South Dakota, died in 1938, she left a legacy of activism for future generations of Indian leaders. As a writer of short stories and poetry under the pen name of Zitkala Sa, editor of the "Journal of the Society of American Indians," and collaborator on an opera ("The Sun Dance"), her literary career spanned the years from 1902 to 1919. Her career in politics took her to Washington in 1916 after. One became secretary-treasurer of the Society of American Indians. In the presidential election of 1928, she and her husband succeeded in getting a plank in the Republican Party platform calling for a presidential commission to investigate and report to Congress on the administration of Indian affairs and guarantees of treaty and property rights to American Indians. Her description of the reality of the corruption and brutality of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (B.I.A.) gained the attention of the General Federation of Women's Clubs and moved them to political action. She battled the Oklahoma trust estate abuses and, from 1926 to 1938, as president of the National Council of American Indians, she protested B.I.A. dictatorial leasing policies. (NEC)

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ZITKALA SA: A Woman Who Would Be Heard!

by William Willard, Ph.D.

Zitkala Sa was the pen name of Gertrude Simmons, writer of short stories and poetry, editor of the Journal of the Society of American Indians, collaborator on an opera, *The Sun Dance*, and political lobbyist.

Her literary career began in 1902 and ceased in 1919 when she left the editorship of the American Indian Magazine, the official journal of the Society of American Indians.

Zitkala Sa had begun her career in politics during her tenure as editor and secretary-treasurer for the S.A.I.

Political activity was inherent in being an officer of the S.A.I. because of the organization's focus on reform of federal Indian policy. That reformist focus meant close attention to congressional bills, federal agency operations, and presidential appointments, with particular attention to the Secretaries of the Interior and Commissioners of Indian Affairs.

The S.A.I. secretary maintained the official national office of the Society in Washington, D.C. in order to best monitor these federal governmental activities for the membership.

Zitkala Sa who had become Mrs. Gertrude Bonnin in her 1907 marriage to Raymond T. Bonnin, had moved husband, child and the S.A.I. office to an apartment in Washington after being elected to office at the 1916 National Conference of the Society.

The Bonnins had left behind them an existence as sometime employees of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, for Raymond five years at the Uintah and Ouray reservation in Utah and before that at the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota.

Before entering B.I.A. employment Gertrude Bonnin had attended the Boston Conservatory of Music, toured in both the United States and Europe with the Carlisle Indian School orchestra, been a teacher at the Carlisle School for two years, and had graduated from Earlham College.

Both Gertrude Simmons Bonnin and Raymond T. Bonnin were enrolled at the Yankton Sioux reservation in South Dakota. In 1916 they had received fee patent Dawes Act allotments of Yankton Sioux land. Both had many relatives at Yankton and were involved with Yankton Sioux reservations happenings all their lives.

In Washington, D.C. Raymond became associated with a law firm interested in securing contracts for legal work from American Indian groups.

Gertrude Bonnin became more than a Society observer of the national political process when proposed legislation was introduced into Congress to ban the use of Peyote on reservations.

During the years in Utah at the Uintah and Ouray reservation, Mrs. Bonnin had developed an intensely hostile reaction to Peyote and to the Native American Church, the religious organization which regarded peyote consumption as a sacrament akin to the Christian Bread and Wine.

In concert with other opponents of the N.A.C., particularly representatives of

Gertrude Bonnin became more than a Society observer.

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the Indian Rights Organization of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Mrs. Bonnin appeared at Congressional hearings to give testimony on the negative effects of peyote.

The Hayden Bill did not become law, but Gertrude Bonnin had become better acquainted with the Congressional environment and with the organizations and individuals involved or ready to become involved in matters affecting American Indians.

Mrs. Bonnin had already gathered some experience and impressions about the I.R.A., the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and many of the individual personalities active in the arena of Indian interests through her Carlisle School employment, the tours with Carlisle musicians and her work with the S.A.I.

Some like the retired General Richard H. Pratt, the founder and long-time superintendent of the U.S. Indian Industrial School at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, she had first known when she was a teacher at Carlisle. Others like Matthew R. Sniffen of the Indian Rights Association she had known primarily through correspondence until that time.

In the presidential election of 1928, the Bonnins succeeded in getting a plank in the Republican Party platform.

After Mrs. Bonnin resigned her position with the S.A.I. she and Raymond appear to have made contacts with the Republican Party, including at least one National Party chairman.

These political party connections were meshed with the efforts of the Yankton Sioux tribal government to secure claims reparations from the federal government for land lost and infringed upon in Minnesota, Iowa, and South Dakota.

On the reservation level the Bonnins were closely involved in Yankton tribal politics. They were particularly concerned with the election of a permanent committee to represent the Yankton tribe in claims affairs so long as there were claims to pursue and with another temporary committee selected to investigate the possibility of a settlement of the Black Hills claims case.

The committees were authorized to contract the services of attorneys to pursue the claims case possibilities. Law firms with political clout at the national level were most likely to be effective in getting necessary action on claims payments from the federal government.

Since throughout the 1920's the Republican Party controlled the White House that party was the party of power, therefore it appears that the Bonnins cultivated their Republican political ties.

In 1921 they went out to Yankton to persuade the tribal government to accept Charles Evans Hughes a sometime Republican presidential candidate as an attorney. Later in the congressional elections of 1926, the Bonnins campaigned for congressional candidates for the Republican Party in Oklahoma and South Dakota. In the presidential election of 1928, they succeeded in getting a plank in the Republican Party platform. The plank called for two things: (1) a presidentially appointed commission to investigate and report to Congress on the administration of Indian affairs; (2) guarantees of treaty and property rights to the Indians of the United States, any law or administrative practice which was prejudicial to these rights should be repealed.

John Collier Jr. has reminded us (Collier, xvii in Kelly: 1983) that the financing of full-time lobbyists is expensive, especially when lobbyists have families which must be supported. He writes that his father, John Collier Sr. was particularly effective in gaining both financial and legal support for his lobbying efforts from a circle of Jewish lawyers and civic leaders in San Francisco.

Zitkala Sa in managing financial and political support for her lobbying efforts seems to have been most effective with wealthy Republican philanthropists, particularly the Eastern Establishment of Belmonts, DuPonts, and Rockefellers. Political power at the national level was controlled by Republican administra-

tions through the 1920's and until the New Deal victory in the 1932 national elections. The Bonnins were obviously working with the politically powerful and financially potent.

Her greatest impact on federal - Indian policy came about as a result of her appearance at a meeting of the General Federation of Women's Clubs in Atlantic City, New Jersey in May 1922. Then in July she appeared to speak at the national convention of the G.F.W.C. in Salt Lake City so that the delegates could hear her account of the tragedies being inflicted on American Indians through the appalling corruption of the Bureau of Indian Affairs' conduct of its federal trusteeship function.

These were the years of a dictatorial system which operated federal Indian schools which were characterized by an institutionalized brutality of physical and mental abuse through forced labor, malnourishment, beatings, and forced religious conversion.

This was the time of the infamous Hiawatha asylum for Insane Indians at Canton, South Dakota, an institution created and maintained by political patronage, which had to have full occupancy to justify an annual appropriation, but did not have to justify the actual diagnosis of inmates, the physical conditions of the asylum, or such things as chaining epileptic inmates to steam pipes. This was the time of the Oklahoma guardianship scandals and the Gray Horse family murders.

Gertrude Bonnin had a wealth of material to draw on for her lectures to the G.F.W.C. Her beaded and fringed costume may have served to catch their attention but her descriptions of the reality of the corruption and brutality of the Bureau of Indian Affairs system kept their attention and moved them to political action on a national scale through a new G.F.W.C. committee.

Zitkala Sa worked closely with Mrs. Stella Atwood, chair of the Southern District of the California G.F.W.C. at Salt Lake City in 1921.

Mrs. Atwood was elected the first chair of the newly created G.F.W.C. national committee on Indian welfare. Stella Atwood had previously in 1917 developed an Indian Welfare Committee of the California G.F.W.C. and had conducted a survey of California Indian communities and had presented the survey results to the U.S. Board of Indian Commissioners, and the hearings of the Congressional Subcommittee on Indian Affairs.

. . . Her descriptions of the reality of the corruption and brutality of the Bureau of Indian Affairs system kept their attention and moved them to political action.

Mrs. Atwood was in close contact with Matthew K. Sniffen of the Indian Rights Association. Sniffen was also one of Gertrude Bonnin's network as a result of the testimony on the anti-Peyote bill. The I.R.A. officials in fact reimbursed Mrs. Bonnin for both her Atlantic City and Salt Lake City travel expenses. They saw Stella Atwood and the two million members of the G.F.W.C. as powerful allies to the I.R.A.

In 1922 Mrs. Atwood hired John Collier as a research agent for her Indian Welfare Committee. Collier who had been involved in settlement house and community organization work in New York City and briefly in California, made his first acquaintance with American Indian problems through a lengthy visit to the home of Mabel Dodge Luhan in Taos, New Mexico from Christmas, 1920 through May, 1921. (See Emily Hahn's *Mabel. A Biography of Mabel Dodge Luhan*, Houghton Miffin, Boston, 1977, for a very readable account of the improbable circumstances of Mabel Dodge Luhan's Life and equally improbable entrance of John W. Collier into "Indian Country.")

Once hired, John Collier hurried away to New Mexico to begin work to combat the Bursum Bill, a scheme to take land and water rights away from the Pueblos of New Mexico.

Gertrude Bonnin at the same time went to Oklahoma to investigate a continuing series of scandals arising from the discovery and development of oil fields

in the northeastern area of Oklahoma.

The land involved in these oil fields generally had been alloted to individual tribal members under the extension in 1898 of the Dawes Sereralty Act of 1887 to the Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Seminole, Chickasaw, and to the reservations in Northeastern Oklahoma.

In 1902 the Secretary of the Interior had made the first oil and gas leases on these lands. Within a half dozen years some 22,000 oil and gas leases had been made.

A complex system of exploitation of the holders of the Dawes Act allotments developed along with the oil field exploitations.

Essentially the system in the region came down to declaring all persons less than ½ Indian ancestry as competent to manage their own affairs including the oil leases and the income from them, and of declaring all persons of ½ or more Indian ancestry to be incompetent to manage their own affairs such as the oil leases and the lease money.

Legal guardianships of these "incompetent" persons was then assigned by Oklahoma courts to local attorneys. The abuses of the guardianship seem to have been limited only by the scruples of the legal guardians and the courts.

The results of Mrs. Bonnin's investigation were first presented in the pamphlet "Poor Rich Indians of Oklahoma," published under the joint authorship of Gertrude Bonnin, Matthew K. Sniffen and Charles H. Fabens by the I.R.A. in 1924.

Later in the same year John Collier published "The Red Slaves of Oklahoma" (*Sunset*: March, 1924), on the same topic.

The two publications were results of a temporary alliance of the G.R.W.C., the I.R.A. and the American Indian Defense Association developed by John Collier in 1923.

The alliance of these organizations for a specific purpose was characteristic for the period, while the very same organizations might well be, (and were) in ferocious conflict about some other matter.

The year 1923 was a year of great activity in federal - Indian matters, the Harding administration Secretary of the Interior Albert B. Fall resigned. Fall had been the architect of a number of plans to bring about cession of Indian land and water rights.

The system came down to declaring all persons of one-half or more Indian ancestry to be incompetent to manage their own affairs...

Albert Fall, through his maneuvering to obtain cession of land and water rights from the Indian Pueblos of New Mexico was basically responsible for bringing John Collier into Indian Affairs. This paradox is attributable to Mabel Dodge Luhan, who lived near Taos Pueblo, who eventually married Tony Lujan of Taos, and who knew John Collier, invited him to Taos, and arranged for Mrs. Atwood to meet him. If Albert Fall had had any foresight at all about the penalties for offending Mabel Dodge Luhan he still had the Teapot Dome scandal waiting to catch up with him for lack of foresight in some other matters.

Hubert Work who succeeded Fall as Secretary of the Interior sought to diffuse the charges of corruption, brutality, criminal conspiracy and mismanagement by the B.I.A., raised by Gertrude Bonnin, John Collier, and their allies. His major attempt was to appoint a Committee of One Hundred selected across a wide spectrum of prominent people.

Gertrude Bonnin was not one of the committee either by design or by personal preference.

The committee held hearings and came out with a final report which was either a fair balanced statement of problems, or a blatant Department of the Interior whitewash according to whichever reaction one happens to read.

Whether or not the Committee of One Hundred report was balanced or whitewash, there were no real changes afterward. Therefore the charges con-

tinued to be made.

Next in 1926, Hubert Work authorized a survey of the administration of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, to be conducted by non-federal, impartial organization, the Institute for Government Research (later the Brookings Institute). The survey was funded by the Spellman Fund and the Rockefeller Foundation, both representing Rockefeller family philanthropy.

The result of the survey, "The Problem of Indian Administration" met with a better reception than the Committee of One Hundred report.

Since Gertrude Bonnin could not possibly be classified as impartial she was not associated with the survey. She was instead involved in Republican Party politics, and in launching her own national organization.

Federal agency whistle blowers got short shrift from the federal hierarchy

In 1926 she and Raymond Bonnin met with some tribal representatives in Washington, D.C. to form the National Council of American Indians. From 1926 until Gertrude Bonnin's death in 1938 she was president and Raymond Bonnin was executive secretary/treasurer. Other offices changed occupancy but not these offices. It should also be noted that the National Council remained the only American Indian national organization until 1941 when the National Congress of American Indians was established. All of the other Indian interest national organizations of the 1920's and 1930's were directed by non-Indian officers (Gertrude Bonnin was on the executive board of John Collier's A.I.D.A. at on time).

In 1928 the year of the publication of "The Problem of Indian Administration," a U.S. Senate Indian Committee began holding hearings and publishing an annual report, "Survey of Conditions of the Indians of the United States." These hearings were to continue until 1943, with a supplemental report in 1944.

Both Gertrude and Raymond Bonnin gave testimony at these hearings concerning reservations which they represented either through the N.C.A.I. or under contract. In 1932 she gave testimony before this committee. She referred to the new B.I.A. permit system which required reservation Indians to sign power of attorney to their reservation superintendents. The superintendents could then lease reservation land to sheep and cattle companies, mining companies, and land companies at whatever lease price the superintendents agreed upon with the leasers; the Indian people who were the land owners had no voice in the leasing agreements.

Gertrude Bonnin in her protests against the B.I.A.'s dictatorial leasing policy was supported by the American Civil Liberties Union, and John Collier's American Defense Association along with her ally, the Indian Rights Association.

She made her points strongly with harshness for those who did nothing to correct the abuses: "Your committee has taken testimony regarding abuses in Indian boarding schools in the Southwest, of violent beating of Indian children even to the extent of death resulting there from; and yet those guilty of these unwarranted acts of violence are still in service. It is easy for men in authority to overlook abuses of this kind because the abuse is inflicted upon helpless people who can not be heard."

She left a legacy of activism

Then as now Federal agency whistle blowers got short shrift from the Federal hierarchy. Mrs. Bonnin pointed out that it was well known what happened: "Your committee knows what was due to those persons who brought these things to your attention. They were dismissed." The major responsibility rested squarely on Congress "Indians are involuntary wards of the Nation and are helpless to defend themselves against brutal or dishonest employees placed in power over them. They must look to Congress to enact wise legislation for their proper protection."

When the presidential election year of 1932 came around Gertrude and Raymond abandoned Hoover and the Republican Party to campaign for Franklin Roosevelt.

This time the election of a new president brought some major changes to the Federal Indian Policy. Gertrude Bonnin's fellow Indian welfare lobbyist, John Collier, was appointed Commissioner of Indian Affairs, an appointment analogous to Ralph Nader being appointed Director of Environmental Protection Agency in contemporary political terms.

During Collier's tenure in office much of the legislation and many of the policy changes which had been advocated during the previous fifteen years were enacted and put into operation.

However, opposition to Collier's reforms began immediately. The economic and political interests, the missionary groups, the assimilationists, and others not easily categorized began a battle against both the reforms, Collier personally, and Collier's associates which continued until his resignation.

These opposing forces were able to bring about revision of legislation and to prevent many of the reforms advocated by Collier, from being implemented as the result of political maneuvering in Congress.

It is difficult to assess where Gertrude Bonnin placed her influence during her last years. Her associates were divided among every faction in these years. There were sometime National Council people who opposed Collier's reforms, and others who supported the changes. The I.R.A. supported some parts of the Collier program and opposed others. The I.R.A. had always held to an assimilationist goal, and had many years of disagreement with Collier on the issue of religious freedom for American Indian religions. There was nothing novel in the division of opinion among the members of the Indian interest organizations.

The N.C.A.I. was involved with tribal groups from throughout "Indian Country." They were always involved with the Bonnin's home reservation the Yankton Sioux, with many if not all of the other Sioux tribes; they are for one example, credited with steering through Congress a Sisseton and Wahpeton Claims Bill which established precedent in securing a $300,000 compensation for violation of land rights. The National Council of American Indians also represented the Yakimas of Washington State, the Blackfeet of Montana, and several Oklahoma groups.

Gertrude Bonnin began the battle against the Oklahoma trust estate abuses through her I.R.A. sponsored investigations in 1923 and the subsequent I.R.A. publication "Oklahoma's Poor Rich Indian."

She and her husband with the assistance of the A.I.D.A. and the I.R.A. are also credited with giving the Cherokee Tribe of North Carolina the necessary assistance to successfully block the allotment and probable loss of their Smoky Mountain land.

R.T. Bonnin represented the Utes of the Uintah and Ouray reservation in Utah. There were grazing rights, leasing violations, and a shale oil-land cessions claims which was maneuvered through the Washington maze of hearings for the Utes until eventual settlement in the Collier administration.

Gertrude Bonnin died in January 1938 in Washington, D.C. completing her life's journey.

She did make a difference and she had been heard. She left a legacy of activism for future generations of Indian leaders.

William Willard (Oklahoma Cherokee) received his Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Arizona in 1970. He is now Director of Native American Studies at Washington State University where he is doing research on Federal Indian policy relating to resource development and health services.

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